

Dragon's Blood

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Summary: When the body of a red-haired scout is found in Skyhold, Ren Trevelyan and the Iron Bull are drawn into the hunt for the killer.

Sequel to "The Heart of a Dragon."

1. Changes

Welcome to part 2 of Ren and the Iron Bull's story! I've always wanted to be a mystery writer, and I was struck by Freddie Prinze Jr's description of the Iron Bull as Thedas's answer to James Bond, so who better to use as a detective? I hope you enjoy it!

* * *

><p>Raising a glowing fist, Ren Trevelyan knocked on the door of the War Room for the first time ever. She had officially stepped down as Inquisitor yesterday, in favor of Ser Robert Morris, former Quartermaster of the Inquisition. Everyone involved had agreed that his skill set was far more suited to a more diplomatically focused Inquisition than Ren's, now that Corypheus was dead. She had spent the last month training him, working in tandem with him as he got used to the role.<p>

Today, she and the Iron Bull had been invited to join the War Room meeting to make sure the transition had gone smoothly and answer any final questions Morris might have. They would stay on in Skyhold for another week, and then they would leave for the little house on the Storm Coast Ren had been given in gratitude for her service to the Inquisition. She and the Iron Bull intended to relaunch the Chargers as Ferelden's premier mercenary corps, but only after they spent a few blissful weeks entirely alone â€| having sex on every available surface.

After a moment, the door opened. "My, that is strange," Josephine said, smiling, as she ushered Ren and the Iron Bull into the room.

"Strange for you?" Ren chuckled. "Imagine how it feels for me." She glanced around the room, settling on Morris's face, his eyes wide as he stared down at the War Table. "How are you holding up, Robert? I mean, Inquisitor."

"Maker. How do you keep the location of all these pieces straight in your head?"

"I didn't; I relied on Cullen's impeccable memory for that."

"I am so pleased I could be of service," Cullen said wryly.

The Iron Bull folded his arms, looking down at the table. "So this is what it looks like," he said. He cast a sideways glance at Ren, who hid a laugh in a cough, or tried to. He knew perfectly well what the War Table looked like. They had snuck in one night and proceeded to see if it could hold up under some very vigorous activity. What's more, Cullen knew it. His ears were bright red. Had Leliana been here, she would have laughed, no doubt, but she was in Val Royeaux, undergoing preparations to be named the next Divine.

Josephine, oblivious to the subtext, flipped a page over on her ever-present board. "I believe the most important question for the assembled company is what we can expect over the next week with the change in Inquisitors."

"In a word, assassins," the Iron Bull said.

"I agree." Cullen frowned. "I would like to think our security is such that we wouldn't have to worry, butâ€"

The Iron Bull finished for him, "No such thing."

"Exactly."

"I would have to agree," Morris said, looking at the table thoughtfully. "With me so new to the work, certain factions may see this as an opportunity to create chaos within the Inquisition, and how better than by leaving it leaderless? Although I believe the danger will be greater in the first weeks after our friend here has taken her leave."

"You mean as long as I'm here, if anything happens to you, I'll have to step back up into the job?" Ren turned to the Iron Bull in mock desperation. "Let's go, right now!"

"Whatever you say, boss." It was only partly a joke; he was as anxious to leave as she was, and as filled with anticipation to be in their own space.

"No, no," Morris said. "You're not getting away that easily! I â€| I'll be fine," he said, as Josephine and Cullen both turned to look at him sharply. "But I'm not quite ready to do this job entirely on my own."

"Don't worry," Ren told him, "I'll stay for another couple of weeks. Hopefully we can work on beefing up security in the meantime."

"You might want to have someone stay in your quarters with you for

the first month or so," the Iron Bull said thoughtfully. "Someone you trust."

Morris's face turned pink. He and Dorian had been trysting more or less secretly for some time. Of course, that wasn't going to last, Ren knew. The Inquisitor sleeping with a Tevinter mage was only slightly less disastrous than the Inquisitor sleeping with a Qunari. Her gain had almost certainly been Morris's loss. But then, he had known that going into the job; she hoped he was prepared for the consequences, more than she had been.

"I will look into it," Morris said.

"It is a good idea, any joking aside. You are most vulnerable when you sleep, and while that is a reasonably secure set of rooms, nothing is entirely so." Cullen looked earnestly at the new Inquisitor. "I will, of course, detail guards to remain at your door for the first month or so, but someone you trust in the room with you would be better."

"We should also assign the Inquisitor personal guards, both seen and not so seen," Josephine said. She sighed. "I wish Varric would agree to come on board as the official spymaster, but he insists he is unsuited to the task." Glancing at the Iron Bull, she sighed again, rather pointedly.

"Not a chance," he said flatly. "Doesn't Leliana have any good people who can step up to the job?"

"None that I know of," Cullen said. "The system runs fairly well, and I have been overseeing it, but I am hardly cut out to be a spymaster."

"No shit." The Iron Bull grinned, and Cullen smiled reluctantly.

"I'll have guards assigned to you, Inquisitor, and a few watchers you won't necessarily see."

Morris frowned at him, glancing at Ren and then back at his advisors. "I don't remember seeing a guard retinue around the Inquisitor before."

"Our friend here is a trained fighter," Cullen told him. "A very good one. And almost from the beginning had a Qunari at her side constantly." He nodded in the direction of the Iron Bull. "While I know you are experienced in the training ring, you have done very little fighting in less studious situations. Another area we should work on."

Morris was looking rather panicked, and Ren smiled, putting a hand on his arm. "Don't worry. Listen to what they tell you and they'll keep you alive and at the top of your game."

Cullen nodded at her, smiling. "Thank you."

"No, really, thank you. I'd have fallen on my face or been poisoned or gotten myself killed, or all three, on a daily basis without you."

"Our pleasure," Josephine said softly.

After some more discussion of safety and various details that had been missed in the changeover, Ren and the Iron Bull left the others to their meeting, ambling side by side through the keep and down the stone stairs to the courtyard.

"_Kadan_," the Iron Bull said abruptly. "Something that didn't come up in there."

"What's that?"

"Morris isn't the only one suddenly a lot more vulnerable."

Ren stopped and looked up at him. "You mean me?"

"To a lot of people, you still are the face of the Inquisition. Others blame you specifically for the Inquisition's actions and decisions. Still more would like to take the power in the Anchor for themselves. I think you're far more likely to be a target than he is."

"Why didn't you say so in there?"

He shrugged. "You're not their problem anymore. Or their responsibility. Oh, neither of them want to see something happen to you, but if it came down to you or him—"no question now which they would choose."

"How nice for me."

Stepping closer, the Iron Bull closed his big hands gently on her shoulders. "That's what you've got me for, _kadan_. Nothing's gonna take you away from me. Ever."

Ren looked up at him, from the sheer size of him to the power in the hands and arms that held her so gently to the scarred and somewhat forbidding, unquestionably unusual, face, to the horns that branched out high above her head. She smiled. "Some people might find that as frightening as the alternative."

"Yeah, but you know different. No one comes into that room but you and me — but the bolt's on the inside, and you can lift it whenever you want to."

"I don't want to. You know that."

"Good."

He let her go, running one hand over her hair caressingly. "So it sounds like you don't have much of a job description these next couple of weeks other than being available if Morris—"if the Inquisitor needs you."

"Sounds about right."

"I'd say we should spend most of it in bed, but—"

"I know." Ren frowned. "Damn small bed." They were sharing his old quarters at the top of the tavern.

"Thin walls, too."

"And here I thought we'd established that people trained by the Ben-Hassrath could control themselves." She grinned at him.

"I can â€¦ it's just not as much fun."

"I'll give you that," Ren agreed. "It's only for a couple more weeks, and then we're off. Storm Coast, private beach, just the two of us â€¦"

The Iron Bull closed his eye. He'd had quite a few very satisfying fantasies about having his way with her in the ocean, the waves lapping over them as they came together. "I suppose I can wait a couple of weeks."

"I don't know what other choice you have."

"I could kidnap you and run away with you."

"And leave poor Morris to sink or swim?"

The Iron Bull shrugged. "I don't remember anyone helping you ease into the job."

"Don't you? I do. I couldn't have done it without him." The light in her eyes made it clear she was talking about him, and he smiled.

"Not quite the same."

"I know. Morris is stuck with me." Ren took his hand for a moment, giving the fingers a brief squeeze. "Speaking of â€¦ I'm supposed to go talk to Master Dennet about the stock, and what we need. He's a bit â€¦ set in his ways, and is having some trouble accepting Morris as the Inquisitor."

"He won't be the only one," the Iron Bull warned her.

"They'll all get used to it. Eventually. Which is why we're only staying a couple of weeks, so everyone has to adjust." Ren let go of his hand. "I promise."

The Iron Bull watched her go, her free-swinging stride and the bounce in her step making him smile. She seemed so much lighter and freer now than she had beenâ€"he didn't know if that was from killing Corypheus at last, or from having given up the job of Inquisitor to Morris, or if it was his own influence, but he loved to watch her so happy and full of energy.

She practically skipped down the steps toward the lower courtyard. When she was out of sight, the Iron Bull turned back toward the tavern.

Krem was waiting for him at their back table, papers spread out. The Iron Bull sat down next to his second-in-command. "What've we got, Krem de la crÃ"me?"

"As much work as we can handle, Chief. The Inquisition by itself can

keep us busy for the rest of the year, and then there's the rest of it. We left a pretty big gap in the market when we signed on here." He looked at the Iron Bull with some curiosity. "You have any idea when you and Ren will be ready to get back to work?"

The Iron Bull sighed. "Never?"

Krem laughed. "I know what you mean." He hesitated. "Did I mention that Flissa and I are planning to take a bit of a vacation in Val Royeaux while you and the Inquisitor are occupied?"

"No; I wasn't sure if she was leaving the Inquisition when Ren does." Flissa had been the bartender in Haven; when they came to Skyhold, Ren had hired her on as personal assistant to the Inquisitor. She and Krem made each other very happy.

"She is; she's coming with us. And â€| Chief â€| "

"Yeah?"

"I'm thinkingâ€|thinking about asking her to marry me."

"You don't say. What brought this on?"

His lieutenant shrugged. "Things are changing, and there are a lot of questions. I don't want this to be one of them."

"Yeah, I get that. Good for you, Krem. I'm â€| proud of you."

"Thanks, Chief. I, um â€| wondered if you wouldn't mind standing up as my best man."

The Iron Bull grinned to cover how touched he was by the request. "Can't think of a better one."

"Neither can I. That mean you'll do it?"

"Of course. Happy to." The Iron Bull frowned. "Getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't you, if you haven't even asked yet?"

"I suppose." Krem blushed a little. "I'm just assuming I know what the answer will be."

"You're probably right. Still, best not to get too cocky." Not for the first time, he wondered about Ren. Would she want that kind of thing someday? He was no longer of the Qun, but he wasn't Andrasteian, either. For that matter, neither was she. That seemed to suggest that neither of them was a candidate for marriage, but where did that leave them, relationship-wise? They had never really talked about the future or any kind of formal agreement. Once they were on the Storm Coast, alone, maybe then it would be time for that talk.

He and Krem returned to their paperwork, scheduling some routine clean-up and patrol work for the Chargers during the time they would both be busy. By mutual agreement, they put Dalish in charge as the smartest of the small cadre of core Chargers. She wasn't great at hiding her magic, but she was a good manager and very effective when it came to keeping her fellow Chargers in line.

Krem cleaned up the papers and took them upstairs to his room, and the Iron Bull made his way to the bar and ordered an ale from Cabot, the dwarven bartender.

"Busy tonight," Cabot observed. "Happy people drink more."

"Sometimes." The Iron Bull had seen it happen the other way, too—anger and despair and sorrow also had a tendency to cause people to drink. Maryden the bard was back, tuning up her lyre, and he sighed. Maryden was nice enough, but her songs were too busy being deep to be tuneful; most of them sounded sad, which had hardly been what the Inquisition had needed in the depths of the war.

Apparently he wasn't the only one who had had that thought. Next to him, a woman's voice with a hint of an Antivan accent said, "Your bard seems unaware that the Inquisition won its war. Or perhaps she is focusing on the wrong aspects of victory."

He turned to look at her. The fact that she had chosen to place herself on his blind side told him something about her; most people chose to sit on the right so he could see them more easily out of his one remaining eye. "I'm told some people find the emphasis on sorrow more meaningful."

"Sad for them. They are missing so much that makes life worth living." Warm brown eyes looked up at him. "You are with the Inquisition?"

"You could say that." Technically, neither he nor Ren were still part of the Inquisition, but the ties were strong. He imagined it would be a long time before they truly left the Inquisition, if they ever did.

He studied the woman next to him. She was very thin, almost painfully so, with a lot of jet-black hair surrounding her face. It almost obscured the pointed tips of her ears, but not entirely. He wondered idly if she was a Crow. The idea had crossed his mind that some of Ren's enemies might try to get to her through him, but if that was the case, they'd find he was a tougher nut to crack than they appeared to have thought.

"You're new around here," he observed.

"I have heard so much about the Inquisition, I could not help but see for myself." She had shifted a bit closer to him. She put a hand on her leg, splayed such that the fingertips brushed his thigh.

The Iron Bull didn't move. It felt pretty good to be picked up, if only for the chance to stretch his intellect a bit to determine what she wanted.

"I had no idea it was so powerful." The fingers shifted a bit closer to him.

"Yeah? Glad to see we measure up to your standards."

The elf smiled, acknowledging his move in this chess match they were starting up, and shifted a bit closer to him.

On her way back to the tavern, Ren stopped in Cullen's office. He looked up at her with a harassed smile. "Oh, it's you, Inqâ€Ren. What can I do for you?"

"Stop calling me Inquisitor, for one thing," she said tartly. "I expected better from you."

His smile widened and became more genuine as he sat back in his chair. "I will try harder, but I make no promises."

"I suppose that's the best I can ask for." Ren sank down in the chair across from his desk. "Cullen, is Morris ready for this?"

"Truthfully?" He sighed. "No. But you weren't, either, and you managed. He will, as well. Don't let his first stumbles keep you from living the life you've chosen."

"Easier said than done."

Cullen chuckled. "It is that."

"I'm going to the tavern for a drink. You want to come?"

He gestured at the piles of papers on his desk. "If I can get through that in a timely manner, perhaps."

Ren grinned. "I know a brush-off when I hear one. I'm going."

She left him hard at work again, glad to have checked in on him, if only briefly. When Leliana had been named Divine, she had broken off the semi-secret relationship that had existed between herself and Cullen. The former Templar had been prepared to see it end, but still â€ he was still suffering from the effects of his decision to go off lyrium, and without Leliana at his side, Ren worried for the consequences. If she could lure him out into the rest of Skyhold more often, she could leave knowing at least he would be in the right hands.

As she came down the stairs into the main room of the tavern, Maryden was just finishing another of her long, sorrowful songs. The bard looked up as Ren came around the bottom of the stairs.

"Ah, there you are!"

"Yes. Here I am." Ren stopped, wondering what it was that Maryden wanted. They'd never been particularly good friends; had, in fact, rarely exchanged more than a greeting in passing.

"Can I play something special for you? This being your first official 'day off', so to speak." Maryden smiled.

"Oh. Well, that's kind of you." Ren glanced up the stairs, seeing Sera's door open, and grinned. "Play the Sera song. I like the beat of that one."

"Anything for you, my lady. I â€ was wondering â€" Maryden began, and hesitated.

Over her shoulder, Ren could see the back of a slender woman with a

long fall of rich black hair, leaning toward the Iron Bull, who was turned halfway around in his seat to look at her. She was sitting on his blind side, granted, but still â€| their heads were very close together. She tore her eyes away to look back at Maryden. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"It was nothing. Never mind." Maryden flushed a little and began playing the "Sera Was Never" song, which Ren had chosen as much because she knew it drove Sera nuts as because she liked the tune.

Forgetting all about the bard, she made her way to the bar, where the woman was shaking back her hair, exposing a pointed elven ear, and laughing low in her throat at something the Iron Bull had said.

Ren didn't think he would do anything that would hurt her; but she didn't like seeing another woman hanging on him this way. She must be a newcomer to Skyholdâ€"everyone else knew perfectly well that the big Qunari was an extremely taken man. And this woman was going to learn that lesson, and learn it well, Ren thought, striding toward the pair of them. She slid a caressing hand across the Iron Bull's broad, scarred back, wedging her body between the two of them.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your new friend, lover?" she asked him, using a deliberately intimate purr as she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

The Iron Bull grinned, clearly aware of her jealousy, and he turned further in his seat so he could see her with his good eye. "Didn't ask her name; she'd only have lied to me anyway."

"Probably so. But I think your Inquisitor may find it a more familiar one than she imagines." The woman's voice was indeed familiar.

Ren looked more closely at her, and broke into a delighted grin. "Zadra? Is it really you?" Ren looked deeply into her former mentor's eyes, finding Zadra older and thinner than she remembered, but there was the same warmth there. "I can't believe it!" The two embraced for a long moment, holding on to one another tightly.

They had first met years ago, when Ren and her father's captain of the guard, Brandt, had run off to be raiders with a man called Dooley. Zadra had been Dooley's lover, and on Brandt's death in battle, the two of them had taken Ren into their tent and comforted her in every way they could, teaching her a great deal about life and love in the process. Dooley had later been killed in a raid gone wrong; Ren had been thrown in jail afterward, and then sent to the Chantry by her father, which had led to her presence at the Conclave. She had never known what became of Zadra after that.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I heard you were running this spectacle down here and I wanted to see if they were taking proper care of you." Zadra winked at the Iron Bull. "I had no luck tempting this one; you seem to have found yourself a good man here."

"That I have." Ren glanced at the Iron Bull, who was watching them both with that enigmatic former Ben-Hassrath look he got when he

didn't fully trust the people he was with. She couldn't blame him. Zadra's sudden appearance at Skyhold, and her choice to approach the Iron Bull rather than find Ren, were a bit suspicious. "Zadra, where have you been?"

"I â€| went home to Antiva for a brief period. To recover." She twisted the silver ring she wore on the third finger of her right hand. "I still miss him."

"I know. I do, too."

"Slowly I began to drift southward, and to hear stories about the beautiful, bold Inquisitor. Eventually I began to recognize my beloved Ren in the stories, and determined to come this direction to check on you. I had a bit of â€| trouble on the way, or I would have been here soon enough to be of some assistance against Corypheus. Although it appears you had all the help you need." She cast a smile at the Iron Bull that was almost, but not quite, free of artifice.

"I could have used you," Ren said, "but I'm sure we can find something for you to do if you're hunting work." She wasn't about to offer a position with the Chargers; Zadra was used to a greater amount of autonomy than the Iron Bull would stand for. For that matter, Ren wasn't entirely sure what her own position with the Chargers would be once they got back to being mercenaries again.

"I â€| am not certain what I will do. But I will stay for a little; I have missed you, my darling." Zadra put up a hand and traced the edge of Ren's cheek.

"And I you." They embraced again.

Ren had never expected her path and Zadra's to cross again, but now that they had, she found herself uneasy. What did Zadra want? What had brought her to Skyhold? Her time as Inquisitor, her long association with the Iron Bull and his spycraft-focused brain, made it difficult to take anyone, even a formerly trusted friend, at face value. They had a few drinks together, and Ren made arrangements to have Zadra put up at the innâ€"hoping that the spies already had people keeping the elf under surveillanceâ€"before she and the Iron Bull retired to their room.

"You want to talk about it, _kadan_?" he asked her.

"Nothing much to talk about. There's more to it than wanting to check on my well-being, for sure. I don't have to have been trained by the Ben-Hassrath to know that." Ren shrugged. "I guess we'll find out." As the Iron Bull kicked off his boots and stretched out next to her on the bed, the springs creaking under his weight, she frowned at him. "Can't say I liked coming in and finding her all over you."

His eye warmed, his hand snaking around her waist and pulling her more firmly against him. "Really got you going, huh?"

"A little. I'm used to everyone knowing who you belong to."

He raised his eyebrow. "'Belong'?"

Ren rolled him over onto his back, exulting in the fact that he went

willingly, and put her hands on his horns, pinning him to the bed. He could have fought back, but he didn't, and she could feel his chest rise and fall beneath her as his breathing sped up. "Belong," she repeated firmly. "And don't you forget it."

"I could probably use a reminder, boss."

"Well, then. If you put it that way." She pulled a red ribbon from her pocket, tying his hands together above his head. Initially, their sex life had been based on her needing to put the burdens of command down, to let someone else take charge. Now that she was transitioning out of the role of Inquisitor, they were switching that around more often, letting her retain that sense of command in the bedroom even as she relinquished it outside.

When they left for the Storm Coast, he would be the head of the Bull's Chargers, and she would answer to him. But here, in bed, with his body twisting underneath her hands, and his hips bucking as she teased him with lips and tongue, Ren took great pleasure in her power over him.

She worked him until she could tell he was close to the peak, then she climbed on top of him, taking him as deeply inside her as she could. Both of them felt constrained by the need to be silent, the walls of his room in the tavern thin enough that the occupants of the neighboring rooms had complained. Ren bit her lip against the cries of pleasure that begged to be released as the tension inside her built to the breaking point. With a muffled grunt, the Iron Bull pumped up against her, his climax triggered by hers.

Collapsing on the bed next to him, Ren untied the ribbon around his powerful wrists. He could rip the fabric easily if he wanted to, and they both knew it.

His arms wrapped around her, cradling her against him. "I'm not going anywhere, _kadan_. There's not a woman in the world you need to be threatened by."

Ren pushed up on her elbow so she could look at him better. "I know that. It's not that I'm threatened, exactly. I just â€¦ I like everyone knowing that you're mine. Does that bother you?"

The Iron Bull chuckled. "Not in the least." More seriously, he said, "In this case, she knew. Not sure if she was testing you, or me, or both, but she knew."

"That's not really a surprise, is it? I mean, I think most people assume I stepped down as Inquisitor for you."

"Yeah." He looked at her thoughtfully. While he didn't disagree with the decision, or with her stated reasons for it, there were times when he wondered how much of a factor their relationship had been. Everyone had made it clear to her that she couldn't have bothâ€”the advisors, her father, the Iron Bull himself. No one was arguing that the post-Corypheus role of Inquisitor didn't play to her strengths, but he couldn't help worrying that she was going to find the position of partner in command of a merc company a big step down from what she was used to. He traced the blue tattoo that wound its way under one of her eyes and over the other. "Just be cautious."

"I will be." She nuzzled the side of his neck affectionately. "My Ashkaari, the one who thinks too much."

"I thought you liked that about me."

"Sometimes. Sometimes I like it when you shut up and kiss me."

He smiled. "Can do."

* * *

><p>The following morning, they were on their way to the sparring ground when Varric found them. His face was as serious as the genial dwarf ever got. "Come with me. There's something you need to see."<p>

He led them to the stables, where the horses were restive, shifting uneasily in their stalls. Horsemaster Denet was there, turning to frown at them in distress as they came closer. "I can't think how this happened! I keep the stables tight closed up and under guard during the night," he said. "It'll take me days to get some of the higher-strung animals calmed down."

Varric seemed to be on the verge of snapping at him, then he sighed and thought better of it. "We'll be out of your stables as soon as we can," he said instead, leading Ren and the Iron Bull to a stall at the end. Inside, one of the scouts sat propped against a wall, head tilted at an unnatural angle. "This is how the horsemaster found her this morning."

Ren didn't recognize the woman, but that was no particular surprise. The Inquisition had so many people; she couldn't know all of them. The Iron Bull knew he had seen this particular scout before once or twice. What he found most striking about her was the particular shade of her hair—the rich, dark red of bloodstone, a color the scout happened to share with the former Inquisitor.

"Someone," he said, "is sending us a message. You want to get rid of a body in Skyhold, you throw it over the side of the battlements, let it get buried in the snow. But this — Leaving the body where it's certain to be found — This was deliberate. This was murder, and someone wants us to know it."

2. Investigation

Wow! Thank you so much for the enthusiastic response to the first chapter - you're all awesome. No update next week, but regular posting will resume the following Thursday.

* * *

><p>After the Iron Bull's pronouncement, they all stood looking at the dead scout. Varric cleared his throat. "Hey, Tiny."<p>

"Yeah?"

"This is — well, I'm only standing in for Nightingale until they can find someone else."

"You want my help."

"In a nutshell."

The Iron Bull looked down at the body of the murdered scout. "Yeah. Can do." He hunkered down next to her. "You know what her name was?"

"Harriette, if memory serves. From Orlais."

Ren frowned. "Do you think it matters where she came from?"

"At this point, everything matters." The Iron Bull gently probed the neck. "The vertebrae back here are like gravel. I'm guessing someone hit her, rather than a quick snap to break the neck."

"So, someone not very strong?" Varric asked.

The Iron Bull glanced up at him. "Or someone very strong trying to throw us off the track."

"What was she doing here?" Ren asked. "Is there a lot of clandestine activity in the stables?"

"Not usually. Dennet runs a pretty tight ship; doesn't take kindly to people messing around near the horses." Varric raised an eyebrow. "If she was trying to do something to the horses, I'd say Dennet's capable."

"Then isn't that the first thing we need to do, find out where she was last seen and what could have brought her down to the stables?" Ren asked.

"First thing we need to do is search this stall for anything out of the ordinary," the Iron Bull corrected her. "Then we find out what she was doing here."

"Oh, Maker's breath." Cullen had appeared in the doorway of the stall. "Do we know what happened?"

"Not yet. Somebody broke her neck, but who and why are yet to be determined."

The Iron Bull was on his hands and knees, gently sifting the straw around Harriette's body. Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, sighing wearily. "Poor girl. I'll look into who her people are and see that they're contacted."

"Thanks, Curly. Tiny and I have this for now, at least."

"Very well. Whatever I can do." Cullen turned to Ren. "The Inquisitor was looking for you."

"Already?"

"Apparently something unexpected came up."

"I'm pretty sure that's the definition of the job," Ren said tartly. "I'll go see what he wants." She glanced at the Iron Bull. "You need

me down here?"

He didn't even look up from the straw. "Nope."

"Come find me when you're done here." She left him to it; if anyone could figure out what had happened to the scout, he could, especially with Varric's help.

She found Morris in Josephine's office. Both of them turned to her when she came in. "Cullen said you were looking for me?"

"Yes. This â€¦ well, it's a bit hairier than I was hoping for my first job as Inquisitor."

"What is it?"

He handed her a letter. It was from a Starkhaven scholar who thought he had found the trail of the first Inquisitor, in the midst of an area of Ferelden where the Avvar made their home.

"That is tricky," Ren said. "The Avvar aren't known for welcoming outsiders in the middle of their territoryâ€"especially on errands that look as though they're going to require digging in a lot of different areas."

"Right." Morris smiled at her optimistically. "Which is why I was hoping you would accompany me when I go."

"Me? But I'm leaving!" Ren could only imagine what the Iron Bull would say if she told him they had to go off to fight a bunch of Avvar and dig up some old bones.

"I know you are. But â€¦ this is fighting, and diplomacy, and â€¦ I've never been out on expedition before, and I thought maybe â€¦ this one last time â€¦ you could show me the ropes?"

Ren sighed. He looked so hopeful, like a big puppy. "All right. All right!"

Morris exhaled in relief, and Josephine smiled. "I told you theâ€"Ren would see reason."

"I don't know if it's reason or if I'm just exceptionally soft-hearted. Also, I should tell you that Varric and Bull are down in the stables right now trying to find out about a scout named Harriette. Apparently she was murdered last night."

"Murdered?" Josephine blanched. "Why? By whom?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. Either of you know anything about this Harriette?"

They looked at each other, concerned, and then shook their heads.

"I'll ask around. Harding isn't in Skyhold right now, is she?"

"No," Josephine said. "I believe she is on her way to the Frostback Basin to begin setting up camp and meet this Professor Kenric."

"All right. We'll leave day after tomorrow," Ren said. Then she gave Morris an apologetic glance. "Sorry. We'll leave when you're ready."

"No, no, it's fine. Day after tomorrow works. It should give Varric and Bull time to work out what happened to the scout."

"In the meantime, we should think about having everyone be a bit more careful."

"And start a panic?" Morris asked. "I think we're better off not saying anything."

"Skyhold is very small, Inquisitor. People will talk," Josephine told him.

"Perhaps."

Ren excused herself, glad that was no longer her decision to make. She made her way up to the rookery, which was still bustling, even in Leliana's absence. She gathered the scouts together and told them about Harriette, noting that while they seemed startled and unhappy, none of them were devastated by the loss. "Do you know if anyone up here was close to Harriette?"

"No, Inqâ€"ser. She kept herself to herself, far as I know."

A second scout said, "I think she spent a fair amount of time in the tavern. Liked the music."

"Liked the bartender, more like," said a third.

"Cabot?" Ren asked. She didn't know the dwarf had ever done anything but stand behind the bar and be grumpy.

"Yeah, that's the one." The scout shrugged. "Not my style, but I suppose if you like that kind of thing â€"|"

"Would she have been there last night?"

"Didn't see her there, but she could've been." The scout frowned. "Weren't you there last night, ser?"

"Yes, but I don't remember seeing her." Of course, Ren had been distracted by the Iron Bull and Zadra. Zadra! She had entirely forgotten her old friend. "Thank you all. You've been very helpful."

"Anytime, ser."

"One of you go down to the stables and report to the Iron Bull and Varric," she said, "tell them what you told me."

After making sure her order was carried out, Ren hurried down the stairs and through the keep to the tavern. Maryden was singing again, something about Harding this time, and Cabot was behind the bar. Ren frowned, watching him for a moment. He was reasonably strong, but shortâ€"if he'd wanted to break Harriette's neck, he might have had to strike her rather than snapping it, based on lack of leverage.

"Ah, there you are, my dear." Zadra waved her over to a table where she was sitting with Krem and Flissa. "Your lovely friends here were just telling me all about you."

"Were they now?" Ren wasn't entirely sure she was happy with this turn of events, but she couldn't have said what exactly bothered her. Krem and Flissa were both fairly discreet, and she had known Zadra for yearsâ€”surely she could trust all of them. Couldn't she?

"Only good things, Your Worship." Krem grinned at her.

"You know I hate that, Krem de la CrÃ”me."

He shrugged, but the cheeky grin stayed in place. Flissa made room for her at the table

"Zadra, you never told me what the trouble was that delayed you on your way here."

"Ah, that. Well â€” let us just say one does not come from Antiva without leaving enemies behind."

"Crows?"

Zadra chuckled. "I only wish. Crows, at least, have a certain codeâ€”they are contracted to kill you, or they are not. No, this was another trouble entirely, and one I do not wish to think about at the moment."

Ren nodded, accepting the evasion, but she wondered. Could Zadra's trouble have followed her here? Could Harriette have run into someone who didn't belong in Skyhold?

"I want to hear all about you, though, my dear." Zadra leaned forward on an elbow. "I understand your Iron Bull was not always a mercenary. Does he still practice the ways of the Qun?"

Ren and Krem both laughed heartily. "The Chief's more of a southerner at heart," Krem said.

"You can say that again." Ren dropped a wink, but underneath she wondered, as she often did. How much of the Iron Bull still yearned toward the ways of his people? He had been devastated when he was named Tal-Vashoth, and he had worked through that largely on his own. It rarely appeared in him now, but â€” there were depths in him that even she had never touched, and he kept his innermost feelings very much to himself.

Zadra appeared to accept their response at face value, and she listened, fascinated, to Krem's stories of the Chargers and Ren's of some of the Inquisition's exploits.

* * *

><p>The Iron Bull studied a clump of mud. It was ordinary Skyhold mud, nothing special â€” but it was on top of the clean straw, in a stall that was rarely used.<p>

"Could've come off her shoe," Varric said.

"Could've. Or it could've come off someone else's." He squinted at it. This was a rare moment when he wished for two good eyes. "You see a pattern in that, like it was stuck in the bottom of a shoe?"

Varric squinted, too, and at last sat back with a sigh.
"No."

"Didn't rain yesterday."

"No, but there's mud in the yard near the horse-trough all the time."

"Yeah." The Iron Bull sighed, getting to his feet. "There's nothing here," he said. "Poor kid."

Varric nodded. "Yeah, would've been nicer if there had been some trace, some way to know what she was doing here."

The scout who had reported to them had just gone, after standing up to a fair amount of scrutiny from both men. She hadn't been lying; Harriette's movements the night before remained a mystery. The Iron Bull hadn't seen her in the tavern, and he would have noticed. He was sure of it.

"They could all be in on it," Varric suggested.

"Doubtful." The Iron Bull shrugged. "If so, we'll know, though. Few more days, any conspiracy's likely to start breaking up."

"Great. So we just wait to see what else will happen?"

"Sounds about right."

Varric groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. "I hope Ruffles and Curly come up with a new spymaster soon. I'm not cut out for this."

The Iron Bull watched him sympathetically. He had been approached by both Cullen and Josephine about taking on the job, which he found ironic, considering the hard time they had given Ren about her relationship with a Qunari when she was still Inquisitor. "You might have to pick your own," he said to the dwarf. "They've got enough on their plates, they're not going to replace Leliana" or you, in this case" unless they absolutely have to."

Varric groaned. "I'll keep it in mind."

"You're in that much of a hurry?"

"I owe Kirkwall a debt. I want to repay it." Varric looked away, never comfortable revealing true emotion.

"I get it. You want my help finding a replacement?"

"Maybe. I'll let you know. How long are you and Rusty here for?"

"Couple more weeks." The Iron Bull couldn't help smiling, thinking of

it.

"Good luck with that." Varric grinned. "They'll keep youâ€"and her, tooâ€"as long as they can."

"I know it." With a frown, the Iron Bull surveyed the stall one more time. "I think we're done here. We should have someone collect her body, do that pyre thing you Andrasteans get into."

"I'll go deal with it. And I'll ask around a little, see if anyone saw her yesterday."

"You do that. I'll head for the tavern, see if anyone there saw her. Sera might have, or one of her 'friends'."

"What about the Kid? Is he around? His getting into people's heads thing could be handy."

The Iron Bull shook his head. Cole would be useful right now; it was too bad he wasn't in Skyhold at the moment. "He went to go find that Templar friend of his, see if they could be friends again now that he's not a spirit. Or less of a spirit. Or whatever the fuck he is."

"Too bad."

"Yeah." With a last glance at the scout's body, the Iron Bull turned and made his way back to the tavern.

It was the usual, no change from any other day. Had a woman left here last night to be killed? It seemed the most likely, but if so, why hadn't he seen her?

Across the room his eye landed on the dark red head of his kadan, and he wondered if that was why. Had he been so distracted by Ren, and by her elf friend pretending to try to pick him up, that he'd missed something vital?

A chill touched him, a hint of the occasional worry he had that this love thing was bad for him, was dulling his sharp edges and wearing away the years of careful training he had done with the Ben-Hassrath. Being with Ren had brought him so many gifts, so many experiences and emotions he had never dreamed of, but it had cost him something, too, and there were moments when he wondered if the price had been too high.

She turned her head, her blue eyes lighting at the sight of him, and he pushed his worries aside in the face of the leap of his pulse when their eyes met. Whatever it had cost him, he had chosen thisâ€"and if he had the decision to make again, it would come out the same.

He crossed the room toward her, at the table where she sat with Krem and Flissa and her friend Zadra.

"Hey, Chief!" Krem moved over to make room. "We were just telling Zadra here about some of the Chargers' more colorful jobs."

"Actually," Ren said, before he could respond or take the seat Krem offered, "I was about to come looking for you." She stood up. "I need

to talk to you."

"Anytime, _kadan_."

She pulled him aside.

"Something up with your friend?"

"What? No. I mean â€¦ yes, definitely there's something weird going on, but that's not what I have to tell you." She looked up at him with an apologetic, somewhat harassed, somewhat resigned expression, and he groaned.

"We're not leaving in two weeks."

"No. And â€¦"

"What?"

"Morris wants us to go with him to the Frostback Basin to meet with the Avvar and help some professor go looking for the first Inquisitor."

"Fuck."

Ren nodded. "That's what I thought you'd say." She stepped closer, sliding her arms around his waist and looking up at him. "You might get to fight some Avvar, and I hear they're really big, almost Qunari-size."

"Yeah, they aren't. Bigger than most, but not that big." Still, his arms stole around her in return, his head dipping toward hers. "Any dragons down there?"

"None that I know of, but â€¦ we can ask."

He kissed her. "This sucks, you know that?"

"I know. I want to get out of here. Butâ€¦" I feel like I owe it to Morris to set him on the right path."

"Varric'll kill me, leaving him here with a mystery on his hands."

"Oh, that's right." Ren disentangled herself. "Any leads?"

"No. He's going to ask around, see if anyone remembers her. I was going to do the same here."

"Let's do it, then."

"Morvoren." He used her full name, which he loved, as a reminder that she had not been trained as a Ben-Hassrath and would be likely to cramp his style in an interrogation.

"Ashkaari," Ren repeated in the same tone, using the name his tamassran had given him when he was small. "If this is going to work, you're going to have to start teaching me."

"To be a spy?"

"To not get in your way."

There were arguments to be made there; he wasn't sure he agreed with her premise. But for now, it might help to have her along. "Fine. Let's go get a drink."

They ambled over to the bar and found seats. The Iron Bull wondered how his _kadan_ was going to react when they were no longer in Skyhold and seats and tables no longer magically opened up just when she needed them.

Cabot was polishing a glass. He gave them a very brief nod. "Ex-Inquisitor. Iron Bull."

"Ale," Ren said. "Times two."

"Sure."

There was a moment's silence. Whatever else he was, Cabot was the least talkative bartender the Iron Bull had ever met.

"Cabot, have you ever seen a scout named Harriette around here? Hair about my color?"

"That the one who ended up in the stables last night?"

"Yeah." The Iron Bull studied the dwarf's face. There might have been something there, but it wasn't guilt. More like regret, maybe.

"I knew her. She was a regular. Liked the music."

"She here last night?"

"Think so." Cabot shrugged. "Can't remember her being here, but I think I would've noticed if she wasn't."

Ren sipped her ale, her eyes on him. The Iron Bull thought he was going to have a time of it teaching her to school her features—it was plain as day that she suspected Cabot had a hand in it.

"Maybe we'll talk to the bard, then," he said, pushing himself up out of his chair and dropping some coins on the bar. Ren ate and drank free anywhere in Skyhold, but he liked to pay his own way whenever possible.

He had timed their move correctly; Maryden was just finishing a set and pausing for a glass of water. "Nice song," he said as they approached her.

The bard beamed. "Thank you. It's new."

"This your first rendition?"

"No, I played it last night. Everyone loved it!"

"You remember seeing a scout here, redhead named Harriette?"

Maryden frowned. "Harriette? Sounds familiar. She came here a lot?"

"Pretty frequently. I guess she was a fan."

"Was?"

"Yeah. She was found dead this morning."

For the Iron Bull's money, Maryden's gasp of surprise was a bit overdone. She followed it up immediately with a glance at Ren, and he wondered if she was trying to show off for the ex-Inquisitor. "Poor girl. Maybe I do remember her. Liked to sit in the corner, nursing a glass of wine?"

"Could be."

"What a shame. Such a lovely girl." Maryden shook her head. "We have had some new arrivals in Skyhold recently. Perhaps someone saw Harriette and thought â€| No, probably not."

She refused to say what she had been thinking, even when they pressed her, and the Iron Bull wondered if the bard had the same thought he hadâ€"that someone had come on Harriette in the dark and taken her for his _kadan_. Had it been an assassination attempt?

All the more reason to go with her to the Frostback Basin and get her out of Skyhold, he decided.

End
file.